

Transcendence: Exploring Movement and Women's Identity through Photography

Undergraduate Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with honors research distinction the Arts in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

by
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I. ABSTRACT:

The creative project explores women's identity and their relationship with nature through a photographic series showing women in surreal and natural landscapes.

I. THESIS STATEMENT:

The purpose of the project is to use photography to encourage new ways of thought in regards to women's identity in modern society. Events, media and narrow mindsets throughout history have painted the picture that women are submissive and viewed as objects, but we are in the midst of a generation of people that reject these constricting identifications. Women are actively recasting the outdated perception of what it is to be a woman. This project serves as a photographic exploration of the identity that shows women channeling their biophilic nature and rebelling. By creating surreal photo montages and photographs I intend to revise the history of women in images as well as the history of surrealism, which is entrenched in arguably misogynistic imagery. In order to do so, the project will be guided by questions in regards to where and when one feels most alive. I will photograph women as they are unapologetically themselves. The women in the photographs will be people whom I resonate with- those who influence me and those whom I see parts of myself in-, for an artist's work is an extension of oneself.

My subjects are photographed interacting with a natural landscape, and the images grow out of the environment. Defying gravity, flying through the air and transcending space, the women photographed are in motion and push life to its limits, literally and metaphorically. These transcendental movements that cannot be explained by laws of the physical universe are a metaphor for the stories of powerful, grounded, rebellious and free women. The images depict movement and tell the narrative of women who are always active, always evolving, and cannot

be easily defined or stereotyped.

Additionally, the photographic series emphasizes the inherently paradoxical nature of photography— photography’s ability to capture fictional narratives while preserving an appearance of objectivity and truth. Surreal photos and photo montages will allow the viewer to question and compare photography to a work of fiction.

II. The Process

My series did not begin by knowing what the end would look like. Instead, my style of image making is one in which the act of creating guides the process. I work from what I know to what I do not know, filling in the gaps with trial and error. As Ann Hamilton eloquently phrases it, “Not knowing isn’t ignorance. Not knowing is a permissive and rigorous willingness to trust, leaving knowing in suspension, trusting in possibility without result, regarding as possible all manner of response.” Once I accepted that failure would be part of the process, I felt free to create.

I would print my “experiments” out as 4x5 images and arrange them. Physically seeing what flowed facilitated the development of my concept and series as a whole. This unknown part of the process is not to be confused with ignorance, for when I photograph, I feel in the moment, similar to being in a state of flow, where I am fully immersed in the activity at hand. This intense focus allows me to capture what feels intuitive. When I am tuned in I feel a greater sense of creative freedom and flexibility, for I can see if something doesn’t look right and change it on the spot. I believe that this sense of feeling when something does not “look right” is inspired by understanding the types of light I am attracted to and knowing the overall feel I want to convey

I also researched the work of two women photographers, Claude Cahun and Francesca Woodman. Reading the essays “Inverted Odysseys” by Shelley Rice and “Corpus Delicti” by

Rosalind Krauss provided me with inspiration that helped shape how I conceptualize visual narratives about the development in women's identity.

I found it interesting that for years' people have been using images as a form of transcendence, existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level.

I. An excerpt from *Inverted Odysseys*, "The people who paid the view these panoramic paintings, the precursors of cinema, did so for the same reasons... they used these images as both personal and collective fantasies. As an escape valves that released them from the spatial temporal and social limitations of their lives.

Even during Vermeer's time images were meant to connect private to public. It is stated that "Young woman with a water jug" is actually the still point in a turning world, the center of a vortex that expands outward to include not only the political and social world, but the cosmos itself."

In creating this series, I began to analyze how qualities inherent to photography, a world that is both truth and fiction, influences the viewers' perceptions of visual metaphors consistent throughout my work.

Flying and levitating women act as a motif in my series. These images force the viewer to question how this happened or whether the scene is truth or fiction. To me, this fictional motif represents how women are creating their role in society by pushing boundaries and creating new possibilities. These images evoke questions, is this real? How am I seeing this? These images intentionally emphasize the power of an image to shape our thoughts, thus encouraging the viewer to question their personal identity. It is a symbol of hope and inspiration

III. The Work



Image Info (from left to right)

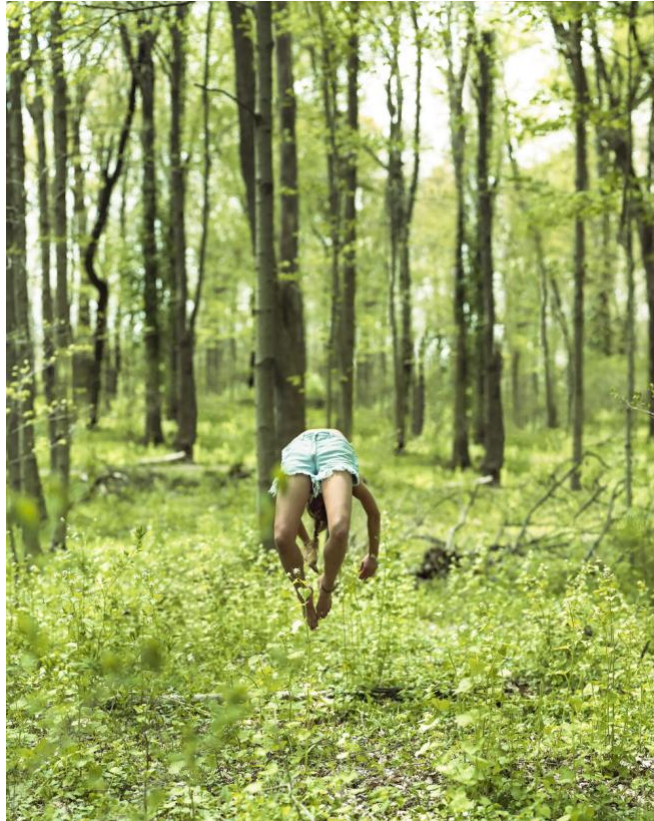


Title: *Movement No. 1*

Materials used: Archival Pigment Print

Dimensions: 16" width x 20" height

Date: 2018



Title: *Lessons on Floating*
Materials used: Archival Pigment Print
Dimensions: 16" width x 20" height
Date: 2017



Title: *She is Beauty, She is Grace*
Materials used: Archival Pigment Print
Dimensions: 16" width x 20" height
Date: 2018



Title: *Flying*

Materials used: Archival Pigment Print

Dimensions: 16" width x 20" height

Date: 2017



Title: *In the Presence of Your Absence*

Materials used: Archival Pigment Print

Dimensions: 16" width x 20" height

Date: 2018



Title: *Surreal Movements*

Materials used: Archival Pigment Print

Dimensions: 16" width x 20" height

Date: 2018



Title: *Presence Not Required*

Materials used: Archival Pigment Print

Dimensions: 16" width x 20" height

Date: 2018



Title: *Transcending the Momentary and the Physical*
Materials used: Archival Pigment Print
Dimensions: 16" width x 20" height
Date: 2018



Title: *Movement No. 2*
Materials used: Archival Pigment Print
Dimensions: 16" width x 20" height
Date: 2018



Title: *Evolving*

Materials used: Archival Pigment Print

Dimensions: 16" width x 20" height

Date: 2018

IV. Artist Statement

Defying gravity, flying through the air and transcending space, the women photographed are in motion and push life to its limits, literally and metaphorically. These transcendental movements that cannot be explained by laws of the physical universe are a metaphor for the stories of powerful, grounded, rebellious and free women. Using digital photography, studio lighting equipment and Adobe Photoshop I turn ephemeral movements into lasting moments. The images depict movement and tell the narrative of women who are always active, always evolving, and cannot be easily defined or stereotyped. The creative project explores ideas related to transcendence, levitation and women's strength through a photographic series showing women in surreal and natural landscapes. The series aim to instill within one a sublime sense of wonder and connection to the world we are all a part of.

The photographic series emphasizes the inherently paradoxical nature of photography—photography’s ability to capture fictional narratives while preserving an appearance of objectivity and truth. Surreal photos and photo montages will make one feel uncertainty, thus allowing the viewer to question and compare photography to a work of fiction. This unknown allows one to remain open and see the world beyond their individual lenses. While interpreting the series, seeing becomes more than an optical perception. The viewer interprets the images through his/her lens of personal experiences, thus projecting their experiences in a deeply engaged way of being.

The purpose of the project is to use photography to encourage new ways of thought in regards to womanhood. Events, media and narrow mindsets throughout history have painted the picture that women are submissive and viewed as objects, but we are in the midst of a generation of people that reject these constricting identifications. Women are rebelling and actively recasting the outdated perception of what it is to be a woman. By creating surreal photo montages and photographs I intend to revise the history of women in images as well as the history of surrealism, which is entrenched in arguably misogynistic imagery. As a photographer, it is my responsibility to share thought provoking ideas and stories, for photography is inherently an interpretative representation of reality. This creative project will bring forward new knowledge in the field by introducing images that viewers have never seen before. These surreal images encourage the viewer to make new connections and to reflect on how we understand the truth in our contemporary experience.

V. SIGNIFICANCE:

We live in a media-consuming world, one in which photographs are nearly a universal language and media has nearly replaced language. As a photographer, it is my responsibility to

share thought provoking ideas and stories, for photography is inherently an interpretative representation of reality. This creative project will bring forward new knowledge in the field by introducing images that viewers have never seen before. These juxtaposed images encourage the viewer to make new connections and see the world in a different light.

The surreal aspects of the photos will make one feel uncertainty. This unknown allows one to remain open and see the world beyond our individual lenses. This is important because now more than ever humans need to embrace our humanity, our capacity to feel and our ability to create new possibilities. As Barbara Kruger states, "Seeing is no longer believing. The very notion of truth has been put into crisis. In a world bloated with images, we are finally learning that photographs do indeed lie." The capability of photos to give new perspectives on constricting ways of thought towards women's identity can encourage new ways of thought that would be more productive to society as a whole.

Most significantly, the project will draw attention to the power of an image to shape our thoughts, thus encouraging the viewer to question their personal identity.